R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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STEREOTYPES REGARDING DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS.

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THE AUTHOR SUBMITTED THAT NEGATIVE PRECONCEPTIONS OFTEN HINDER THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS IN CULTURALLY DEPRESSED AREAS. MOST DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN ARE NOT SPECIAL DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS, NOR EXCEPTIONALLY HOSTILE OR UNRESPONSIVE. THEY AND THEIR PARENTS HAVE HIGH, EVEN UNREALISTIC, EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS. TEACHERS SHOULD ENCOURAGE THE SELF-DISCIPLINE WHICH LEADS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS, WHICH, IN TURN, WOULD BREAK THE CYCLE OF SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES OF FAILURES. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "JOURNAL OF SECONDARY EDUCATION," VOLUME 40, NUMBER 3, MARCH 1965. (NC)

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Stereotypes Regarding Disadvantaged Students

DANIEL U. LEVINE

(EDITOR'S NOTE: *Dr. Levine presents a certain picture of the "educationally disadvantaged" student and deals with what he calls the "myth" of the "jungle school." The article that immediately follows, "Effective Schools for Educating 'Culturally Disadvantaged' Children," is written by a teacher in a school made up of "educationally disadvantaged" students in New York City. There is a subtle difference in the point of view and philosophy presented in the two articles that should challenge the interest of the reader.*)

> Everybody wants to play basketball, that's one of the main things in life, so people get a basketball, and they go out in the yard and play basketball. Then the dean runs out in the yard and catches them and writes them up, and every time it's the same thing. The same ones playing basketball; cause that's what they like.
>
> Harlem boy, aged 15[1]

Few deny that the physical decay in our central cities is more than matched by the waste in human life which so tragically complements it. The number of youngsters whose lives drain away in meaningless loitering is no longer thousands, but hundreds of thousands. Their desperate, fragile attempt to achieve a minimum of self-respect is symbolized by the hats they wear while endlessly shooting-shuffling at netless baskets. Seen in person or described by observers, they are highly visible, and they inspire a guilty mixture of fear and pity in those who are more fortunate. The more intense our concern, the more fear-compassion distorts our view of the real problems which confront these stepchildren of poverty.

SOME of the high schools in our central cities serve three, four, or even five thousand youngsters. During the course of a term hundreds of students find themselves

in trouble with administrative offices, and hundreds more create even more serious problems for police and court authorities. Administrators and teachers necessarily focus abnormally large amounts of their attention on serious discipline problems which threaten to disrupt all the school's activities. How easy it is for an insider to forget that the majority of students in a

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difficult school are characterized by rather typical patterns of adolescent behavior (their responses, that is to say, are erratic but tolerable). How easy it is not to notice that most of them heartily support the efforts of school authorities to maintain viable institutions. How easy it is, especially for outsiders, to blanket all of them as "aggressive" or "uncontrollable," and then selectively to note confirming evidence while remaining relatively unaware of evidence which contradicts this stereotype. Similarly, our desire to modify asocial values causes us to magnify the extent to which disadvantaged youngsters are hostile and unresponsive. Distressingly large numbers of them are openly, even contemptuously disrespectful of authority, but more of them are, if anything, excessively polite and passive. Many teachers know this, and yet the myth of the "jungle" school appears to be gaining greater currency each year.

Some of the myths arise partly because they serve our own psychological needs. In any difficult school, for example, there are teachers and administrators who say that low aspiration and lack of desire to succeed in school are the factors mainly responsible for widespread lack of interest in classroom activities. Observing the full range of behavior of students in a difficult school will show that neither of these claims is accurate. In fact, many studies of attitudes among Negro youngsters in low socio-economic areas have shown that their aspiration as indicated by career choices and plans to attend college are so high as to be tragically unrealistic. The most heartbreaking part of the term in a difficult school is the first few days. Despite the fact that their hopes have time and again been dissipated, even the most low-achieving youngsters return hoping and resolving that somehow things will be better this year. What is true is that few of them have the type of self-control which leads to success in school and fewer still have the educational background to translate high aspiration into adequate school achievement. The myth is functional for teachers because it helps overcome the immobilizing pity with which we would otherwise respond to the agony of youngsters whose hopes appear so futile and groundless, but it further encourages students to lapse back into disinterested disdain for the school work they find so frustrating.

EXAGGERATING the degree to which the behavior of disadvantaged youngsters is due to negative rather than unsuitable motivation too often is parallel in generalizations about their parents. Unbelievably, the same teachers whose students are physically thrashed by their parents for low grades or unexcused absences are often heard asserting that the parents "don't care." The fact is that parents in the slums place a much higher practical value on education than they are able to express to their children except directly by means of beating and cursing. It is true that many lie or feign nonchalance when our accusatory manner puts them on the defensive, and still more are bewildered into eventual withdrawal when they discover that interest and guidance expressed through occasional whippings do not long improve performance in school. But inability to channel concern into constructive channels is very different from the

lack of concern we read into their withdrawal.

SOCIAL disorganization does not promote careful handling of materials, and therefore textbooks in communities in which social pathology is widespread last only half as long, or less, as in more fortunate communities. Again, it is a substantial minority that is responsible for most of the damage, but in our revulsion we allow ourselves overgeneralized conclusions such as "*Those kids* can't take care of books" or "*They* don't care." It is a very short step to the conclusion that replacing damaged texts and books is not worth the bother. The result is that large numbers of well-intentioned youngsters who *do* take admirable care of school property are left without adequate materials.

All these unjustified myths associated with imagined "blackboard jungles" make it even more difficult to acquire and keep teachers in disadvantaged communities than would otherwise be true. They create situations in which students are more likely to act out self-fulfilling prophecies. But perhaps their most harmful effects reside in their tendency to divert our attention from the real problems in difficult schools. Above all, disadvantaged youngsters need a combination of sympathetic understanding and firm guidance. Almost all of them are inevitably weakened by an adolescent subculture which glorifies sensual pleasures and discourages the practice of self-denial to an even greater extent than does the general teenage culture which it reflects. Few of them have had experience either at home or at school which would help them appreciate that long hours of struggle are necessary in translating high aspiration into educational preparation. As a result both the quality and quantity of their classroom output are low, and they respond resentfully to school assignments. Our efforts to help them will be more successful if we focus our attention on the causes of their poor performance rather than on misleading symptoms and inertia-producing stereotypes.

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[1] quoted in *Youth in the Ghetto: A study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change* (New York: Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc., 1964), p. 320

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ALLAN C. ORNS

In 1950 one o in America's four considered "cultu 1960 the figure h three. It is estimat of every two urba this category.[1]

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